

A monsoon expedition

BY TASHI DORJI

The 85-kilometre ride along the rough and potholed road from Sunkosh to Dagana was the most difficult according to the three Bhutanese mountain bikers who rode 1,992 kilometres in a 24-day biking expedition across the country.

"We had to ride in incessant rain for about five hours and we reached Dagana in seven hours," said one of the bikers.

While they did not have any major problems two of bikers did suffer from saddle sores because of continuous riding in wet weather.

Tanned from the exposure to the weather but their faces showing little sign of exhaustion, the three bikers - Ugyen Yoesar, 26, Wangda Tobgyal, 34, and Palden Phuntsho, 24 - arrived in Phuentsholing on August 13 concluding the first biking expedition across the country.



The bikers in Phuentsholing after 1,992 kilometres and 24 days

"The whole expedition was challenging and it was dangerous at times biking along the highways with vehicles speeding by," said Wangda Tobgyal.

The expedition started on July 21 from Samdrup Jongkhar in the eastern Bhutan and passed through eighteen districts except for Gasa and Samtse.

"We are very satisfied that our expedition was a success," said team leader, Ugyen Yoesar.

The bikers peddled an average of 5 to 7 hours and covered about 75 kilometers each day. The longest ride was the 133-kilometre stretch from Zhemgang to Gelephu.

They spent the nights in hotels wherever possible and also camped in tents in many places. A bus carrying their gear accompanied them.

On the expedition the bikers also visited middle and higher secondary schools around the country and talked to students on leading a healthy life about reproductive health and substance abuse.

"Students were very open to us and we were showered with a lot of questions," said Ugyen Yoesar. The sessions on substance abuse was popular in almost all the schools because Palden Phuntsho, who was into drugs for about a decade in the past, shared his experiences.

The expedition which cost about US \$ 4000 was funded by Youth Development Fund, Thunder Dragon Tours and Treks and the Zimdra automobiles.

Life is too short to waste

Palden Phuntsho loves adventure. He is a tour guide and a rock-climbing instructor. He does not drink, chew tobacco or doma but occasionally smokes cigarettes.

Yet who would have believed it just a few years ago?

Palden Phuntsho began smoking at the age of 10 and tried marijuana before his teens. Soon he started taking prescription pills. One thing led to another and within a year or two, he was into all kinds of serious drugs that began taking control over his life. His social life wasn't sound either. "I found myself engaged in many fights," he told Kuensel.

The transformation came four years ago when he quit everything at once. "It was difficult but I did it," he said. Today he feels on top of the world that he got his life back.

The inspiration to turn his life around came from his father. "When I was into drugs, my father encouraged me to take up adventurous sports like mountain climbing, he knew my interests and he never gave up trying to encourage me," said Palden Phuntsho.

"I had lost three of my friends who used to take drugs with me," recalled Palden Phuntsho. "It was haunting to wake up in a hotel and find that one of my friends had died."

On the expedition many of the students Palden Phuntsho met wanted to know his tryst with drugs. "How did I start? How did I stop? were the most frequently asked questions," said Palden Phuntsho.

Students also wanted to know if he was having any side effects and whether it showed while he was biking around the country. The answer was an obvious "no."

"Life is too short to waste," he told Kuensel.

Biking for life



Biking with a message: (from left) Wangda Tobgyal, Ugyen Yoesar and Palden Phuntsho

BY KARMA CHODEN

Three Bhutanese mountain bikers have pushed off on a "Bike for Life" expedition that will traverse 2,000 kilometres of national highways in 27 days.

The expedition which began on July 21 from the border town of Samdrup Jongkhar in eastern Bhutan will cut across 18 dzongkhags through altitudes from 300 to 4,000 metres and end in Phuentsholing on August 17.

Team leader, Ugyen Yoesar, who aspires to be a professional mountain biker, said that besides the thrill of biking across Bhutan's

varying terrain



the team would also take important messages to school children of 20 secondary schools along the way.

The bikers plan to talk to school children on the dangers of drug and alcohol abuse, teenage pregnancy and other reproductive health issues.

"The ride is for fun but we would also like to pass on the message to the youth of our country how exciting and healthy it is to be active," said Wangda Tobgyal, one of the three bikers.

The team hopes to make the

expedition, which is being done for the first time, an annual event and encourage other youths to participate in similar expeditions in the future.

Equipped with the latest biking gear and rigorous training the team hopes to overcome any challenges. "We have warned ourselves that it is going to be psychologically tough and physically exhausting," said Ugyen Yoesar. "Biking is an endurance sport and biking in one of the most rugged and mountainous terrains in the world is not an easy task."

The team plans to bike for seven hours through rain and shine and cover an average distance of 75 kilometres everyday. "Since it's a long ride we plan to go slowly," said Ugyen Yoesar.

The riders will be carrying their own stock of drinking water, power gels to energise them and spare parts for the bikes. A bus with a cook will tag along with the team to provide food and other requirements.

Anticipating the worst, the team has also insured themselves and consulted doctors.

Ugyen Yoesar, who idolises the Tour de France champion, Lance Armstrong, said that although no comparisons could be made, the bikers would be biking no less than the professionals. "Our terrain is much higher, rougher and more difficult and we are happy that we are the first to do so," he said.

The expedition is promoted by the Youth Development Fund.